WIKIPEDIA
The Free Encyclopedia

Draft:*The Prompter* (periodical)

This is an old revision of this page, as edited by Trinsics (talk | contribs) at 21:20, 19 August 2025 (→*Sources*). The present address (URL) is a permanent link to this revision, which may differ significantly from the current revision.

The Prompter was a London theatrical periodical published semiweekly on Tuesdays and Fridays from 12 November 1734 to 2 July 1736, co-published/edited by Aaron Hill and William Popple, in a run of 163 numbers.[1][2][3] The paper concentrated on stage criticism, acting, and theatre management; among contributors discussed in scholarship are Henry Fielding and James Ralph.[3][4]

The Prompter

Editor	Aaron Hill William Popple
Categories	Theatre criticism; essays
Frequency	Semiweekly (Tuesdays and Fridays)[1]
First issue	12 November 1734
Final issue	2 July 1736
Country	Kingdom of Great Britain
Based in	London
Language	English

History

The Prompter was issued semiweekly in London from 12 November 1734 to 2 July 1736. A bibliographic census enumerates the run as **nos. 1–173** (semiweekly), with the Yale copy lacking nos. 24, 84, 93, 116, 138, and 152; other studies count **163** numbers.[2][1] Each number was a single folio sheet, printed in double columns on both sides; the work is classed as rare, with sets recorded at Yale and the British Museum.[1]

The periodical was co-published by Aaron Hill and William Popple, the latter previously a contributor to Savage's *Miscellany* (1726).[1] It was launched amid calls to reform the management of London's patent theatres, and early numbers set out a program of stage criticism and practical reform.[1][3]

Contents mixed brief essays with theatre notices and commentary on current debates, including Italian opera and the economics of the London stage; selections in the 1966 edition include attacks on castrato celebrity and appeals for reform.[5] Some contributions have been associated in scholarship with Henry Fielding and James Ralph.[4]

Content and authorship

Numbers signed **B** were written by Aaron Hill and those signed **P** by William Popple; after no. 132 the papers were issued unsigned. Although primarily theatrical, a substantial proportion—largely Popple's—treated non-theatrical topics such as morals, "harmony and discord," sociology, economics, and politics.[6]

In no. 2 the signature **"B"** was glossed as the **"Broomstick,"** with which the Prompter would sweep the playhouses and their performers. From the outset (no. 1) the paper announced an intention to correct actors "out in their parts," to caution even the "perfect," and to criticize managers and performers impartially.[6]

Early numbers illustrate the polemical tone. Nos. 2–3 singled out Colley Cibber, arguing he was fitted for comic rather than tragic roles (e.g., Syphax, *Richard III*); by no. 4 the managers were reported to have "taken up arms." No. 13 printed a satirical letter from "the country" in which "Common Sense," revived in Barking by a vicar, was invoked to criticize contemporary theatrical practice.[6]

Subsequent essays developed a sustained critique of London theatre. A further letter in no. 13 attacked the idolizing of pantomime and the mangling of new plays, and attributed the corruption of dramatic art to managers' avarice, actors' incompetence, dramatists' mediocrity, and audiences' tastelessness.[7] Acting style was a recurring target: players were said to show little reality of passion, to act only on their own lines, and to swing between inert delivery and "bellowing," a decline pinned partly on lax rehearsal.[7] Pronunciation and diction likewise drew fire; in no. 113 (9 December 1735) the paper complained that performers had "banish'd" the letter **Y**—turning *my*/*thy* into *me*/*the*—and altered pronunciations (*bosom* → *boosom*, *calm* → *cawm*, *greatness* → *greetness*).[7]

The periodical framed the stage as a moral institution, "more potent than the pulpit," listing virtues to be commended (patience, moderation, clemency, compassion) and vices to be censured (prodigality, flattery, hypocrisy, vanity), notably in no. 80.[8] It charged dramatists with turning a "school for virtue" into diversion; contrasting the ancients' view that tragedy was a "school of wisdom" and comedy a "school of reproof" (no. 79), it concluded that "No Theatrical Pieces ought to appear on the stage, but such as are strictly, and intentionally, moral."[8]

Managers were a frequent object of attack. John Rich and Charles Fleetwood were nicknamed "Lunny" and "Lightwit." While no. 109 initially described Fleetwood as a "gentleman of character and fortune," by no. 135 his management was condemned, with *The Man of Taste* (attributed to James Miller) singled out as especially objectionable.[8] On the revival of *The Maid's Tragedy* (no. 109), the paper argued that a patent-house manager, as a "general trustee" for the nation, should avoid "king-killing" plays, concluding that "Cold, intentional, murder deserves the correction of the gallows, not of the theatre."[8]

Specific repertory received similar treatment. In no. 105, Nat Lee's *The Rival Queens* was faulted for the choice of episode from Alexander's life and for allowing vice to triumph without "poetical justice"; the same number praised Congreve's wit and plotting in *The Double Dealer* but condemned its "ill-chosen fable," judging characters such as Maskwell and Lady Touchwood outside the province of comedy.[9] By contrast, *The Connoisseur; or, Every Man in his Folly* (no. 134, 20 February 1736) was commended as moral and instructive, ridiculing "ignorant pretence to a taste" and the affectation of valuing the foreign merely because it is foreign.[9]

Opera drew sustained criticism. Early numbers called Italian works "sing-song concerts" lacking plot and meaning, argued that the language excluded English singers and much of the audience, and remarked on Farinelli's celebrity despite singing only twice a week.[9] The paper contrasted Farinelli's reported £4,000 annual income with the £500 available to senior household officers, presenting

opera as a "Foreign Plague" with corrosive social effects; at the same time it asked "by what argument in nature" a singer could deserve more than an actor who moves audiences toward virtue (nos. 7, 11, 13). Many of the harsher anti-opera pieces were signed **P**.[10]

Audience conduct was also blamed. No. 80 catalogued common types of playgoers, implying poor prospects for serious drama; and no. 136 described a noisy night at "His Majesty's Dramatical Bear Garden" during *Every Man in his Folly*, where disorder from gallery to boxes, and actors forgetting their parts, prevented judgment of the play.[10]

Alongside criticism, the paper advocated remedies: either reform of the patent houses or the establishment of a new "national" theatre. No. 38 (21 March 1735) denounced the playhouses as schools of "Publick Effeminacy, and Corruption" instead of "Academies of Courage, Good Taste, and Humanity," and outlined political, religious, and civic uses of the stage. It also commented on the Playhouse Bill then before the Commons, favoring limits on the number of houses while urging that the existing theatres be "correct[ed], and new model[led]."[11] Later numbers called for royal patronage (no. 136), with a related proposal for a "tragic academy" to train actors (September 1735), and suggested subscriber support if royal backing failed. No patron appeared; the paper ceased in July 1736, and the Licensing Act 1737 subsequently confirmed the patent houses' monopoly.[12]

Reception and legacy

Later scholarship treats *The Prompter* as a significant venue for stage commentary in the mid-1730s, notable for sustaining semiweekly criticism over nearly two years.[13][11]

The periodical's portrait of the stage is markedly bleak and has been contrasted with Colley Cibber's more sanguine *Apology*. It is also noted as the first theatrical paper to maintain such regular, twice-weekly scrutiny, extending beyond earlier moralists such as Rymer and Collier, who wrote from outside day-to-day theatre practice.[11]

As a snapshot of the 1730s theatre, studies judge the paper largely accurate: acting was at a low ebb (with veterans gone and later stars not yet ascendant), audiences were unruly, dramatists (save Henry Fielding) were uneven, management at Drury Lane was unstable after long prosperity, and John Rich's new Covent Garden (opened 1732) favored pantomime; between 1732 and 1742, the "legitimate" stage lacked a clear champion.[11]

As documentation, the paper is often general in its strictures and sparing in detailed play or staging analysis, yet it is considered invaluable for reconstructing acting styles and remains of more than minor interest for its role in theatrical politics.[14]

The text has been reprinted in a collected edition (1966), which is commonly used for citation.[3]

See also

- Aaron Hill
- William Popple

- Henry Fielding
- James Ralph

References

1. Burnim 1961, p. 74.
2. Crane & Kaye 1927, p. 92.
3. Appleton & Burnim 1966.
4. Battestin & Battestin 1993, p. 80.
5. Appleton & Burnim 1966, p. 39.
6. Burnim 1961, p. 75.
7. Burnim 1961, p. 76.
8. Burnim 1961, p. 77.
9. Burnim 1961, p. 78.
10. Burnim 1961, p. 79.
11. Burnim 1961, p. 80.
12. Burnim 1961, pp. 80–81.
13. Sutherland 1952.
14. Burnim 1961, p. 81.

Sources

- Appleton, William W.; Burnim, Kalman A., eds. (1966). *The Prompter: A Theatrical Paper (1734–1736)*. New York: B. Blom.
- Battestin, Martin C.; Battestin, Ruthe R. (1993). *Henry Fielding: A Life* (https://archive.org/details/henryfieldinglif0000batt). London: Routledge – via Internet Archive.
- Burnim, Kalman A. (May 1961). "Aaron Hill's "The Prompter": An Eighteenth-Century Theatrical Paper". *Educational Theatre Journal*. **13** (2): 73–81. doi:10.2307/3204685 (https://doi.org/10.2307%2F3204685). JSTOR 3204685 (https://www.jstor.org/stable/3204685).
- Crane, Ronald S.; Kaye, F. B. (1927). "A Census of British Newspapers and Periodicals, 1620–1800" (https://www.jstor.org/stable/4171968). *Studies in Philology*. **24**. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press. JSTOR 4171968 (https://www.jstor.org/stable/4171968).
- Harris, Bob (1993). *A Patriot Press: National Politics and the London Press in the 1740s*. Oxford University Press. p. 31.
- Sutherland, W. O. S. (1952). "Polonius, Hamlet, and Lear in Aaron Hill's "Prompter" ". *Huntington Library Quarterly*. **15**: 153–168.
- Sutherland, W. O. S. Jr. (1957). "Essay Forms in the *Prompter*". In Bond, Richmond P. (ed.). *Studies in the Early English Periodical*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. pp. 137–149.

Retrieved from "https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Draft:The_Prompter_(periodical)&oldid=1306815726"